

The Case of Vandana Singh: Reading Indian Science Fiction, with a Warning about Wrongs

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This is the text and the PowerPoint file of the paper presented at the International Conference of the Spanish Association of Indian Interdisciplinary Studies (AEEII), *Writing/Righting Wrongs: Misrepresentation, Discrimination, Inequality*. Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, 29 November to 1 December 2017



As you may see, the original title of the paper, “The Confluence of Mysteries: Myth, Mathematics and the Multiverse in Short Fiction by Vandana Singh”, is now a superfluous alliterative subtitle meant to conceal, as far as possible, the limited close reading of Singh’s fiction in this essay. Perhaps if I had worked on her beautiful short fiction in a context different from this of this conference, I would have focused directly of the four words beginning with an ‘m’ in my first title. However, the need to read the available academic bibliography on Singh within the context of a conference called

Writing/Righting Wrongs has led me in a direction that, while not that difficult to anticipate, was not my original aim. But, then, how can one speak of an Indian writer without taking into account the connections between Indianness and postcolonialism?



This conference intends to redress the wrongs done to India regarding its colonialist misrepresentation, the discrimination against her writers and the inequality with which texts and authors have been dealt with outside Indian borders. A worrying issue, then, is why the West stubbornly ignores India's prominent position on the map of world-wide science, past and present. Also Indian science fiction, the genre that best narrates the complex relationship between this nation and technoscience.

The existence of Indian science fiction in many languages is simply indisputable.

Indian Science Fiction

Dr.Srinarahari MH, Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies

- **Hindi:** Devakinandan Khatri, Devendra Mewari, Arvind Mishra
- **Tamil:** C. Subramania Bhartiya, magazine *Kumudan*
- **Bengali:** Adrish Bardban, Anish Deb, Meenakshi Chattopadhyay, Narayan Sanyai, Niranjana Sinha, Sathyajith Ray, Sirshendu Mukhyopadhyay
- **Telegu:** KRK Mohan
- **Oriya:** Gokulananda Mahapathra
- **Assamese:** Dinesh Chandra Goswami
- **Kannada:** Rajashekhara Bhoosanoor Mutt
- **Marathi:** Bal Phondke, Jayanth V Narlikar, Jagadish Kabare Arun Manday, etc.

Here, however, I must focus on its English-language variety since I don't know any other language spoken in India.



Indian Science Fiction

Dr.Srinarahari MH, Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies

- **English** (30): Anupam Bhattacharya, Arvind Risbud, Arya Madan Mohan, Ashok Banker, Bharathi Ramachandran, Bhushan Kapoor, Dilip M.Salwe, G.P. Phondke, Harshita Verma, Jayanth V. Narlikar, Kenneth Doyle, KRK Mohan, Laxman Londhe, Meyhna Sugata Mitra, Mukul Sharma, Niranjana Gagte, R.N. Sharma, Radha Ganguli, Rajashekhara Bhoosanoor Mutt, Ramesh Deshpande, Salil Chowdhary, Sanjay Havanoor, Sathyajit Ray, Shalini Tuli, Sourabh Bhattacharya, Srinarahari, Subodh Jawadekar, Surekha Nagar, Surekha, Vandana Singh and others...

Allow me to clarify that Anglophone Indian science fiction has not been rejected for racist reasons in the West but, rather, overlooked, like many other national traditions in this genre. The recent publication of a monographic issue on Indian sf by the American journal *Science Fiction Studies* in November 2016 is not exactly (or only) redressing a colonial wrong but calling attention to treasures unknown to Anglophone readers. My own co-edition (with Fernando Ángel Moreno) of a similar issue on Spanish science fiction for this journal, published in July 2017, has taught me that whether post-imperial (like Spain) or post-colonial (like India), local literary traditions must always struggle in order to be acknowledged by Anglo-American readers. Even by science fiction readers, who are used to enjoying the most transnational of all narrative genres.

Despite the many differences, there are some similarities between the wrongs suffered by Spain and by India. Spain, like India, is seen as an exotic setting for fantastic stories by foreign writers representing Anglo-American rationality. Spain ceased being an Islamic colony back in 1492 to become a trans-Atlantic Empire, unfortunately for the native North, Central and South American populations. Once powerless, our nation became a favourite exotic land with Romantic travellers, among them the American Washington Irving, author of *The Tales of the Alhambra* (1832).



This exotic exploitation of Spain is a wrong that saps out self-confidence, undermining the Spaniards' ability to build the norm against which their own reality must be measured. This is why local Spanish science fiction is received with so much wariness among Spanish readers, for they still feel that they are the exotic Other. The case is, with all due respect for the immense cultural and political distance, similar for post-colonial India.



Thus, the monographic issue which I have mentioned carries, inevitably, an article on Ian McDonald's well-known novel *River of Gods* (2004). Suparno Bannerjee sentences that, in contrast to blatantly exoticising representations of India in Western science fiction, "McDonald's approach to the complex sociocultural fabric of India is

much more nuanced, although still exhibiting distinct traces of Orientalist stereotypes” (2016: 496). McDonald, a Mancunian currently living in Belfast, is limited, then by the “historically unequal power relationship” (496) between Britain and India. He, however, deserves high praise for expanding our “awareness of a possible alternative future” (510) in which “the emerging global powers of the twenty-first century” (510) play a major role.

How is this awareness increased by the Indian writers? By producing quality science fiction responding to concerns which are specifically local but also of global relevance—just as their Anglo-American peers do.



The Indian authors are struggling to turn the label ‘Indian science fiction’ into a brand that appeals to Indian readers tired of being misrepresented as the exotic Other, but also to open-minded international readers. Anglo-American science fiction is enjoyed abroad because it never gives the impression of being just of local interest, for its authors write with complete self-confidence. Indian science fiction aims at producing the same impression.

This self-confidence is the most attractive feature in the work of the author I am focusing on here: Vandana Singh. Born and brought up in New Delhi, Singh presents herself in her website as a writer of “speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and fantasy”. She has a PhD in Theoretical Physics and works currently as an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics and Earth Science at

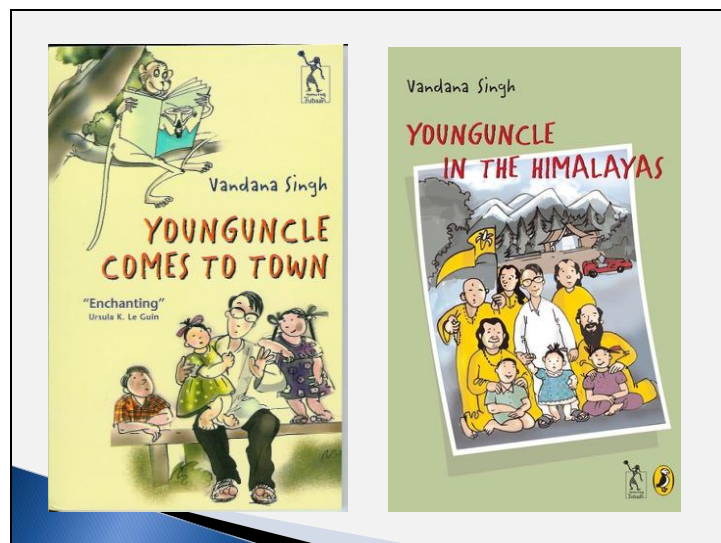
Framingham State University, in Massachusetts. And, although she started writing both in Hindi and English, her main focus is now the latter.

Vandana Singh

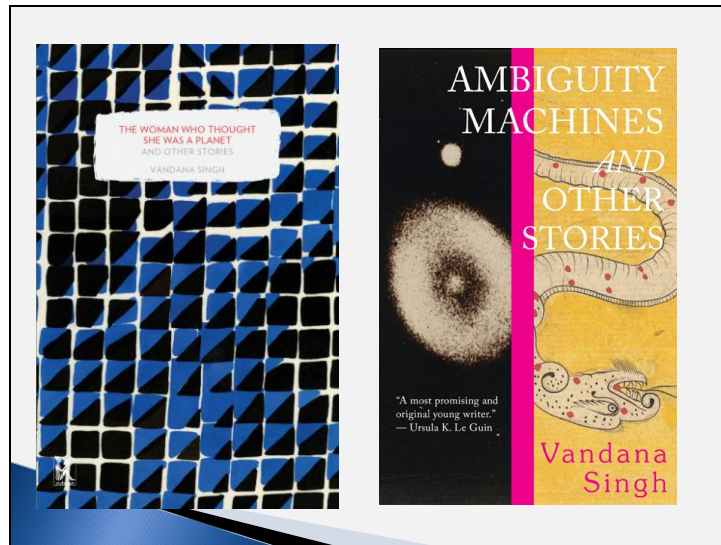


- Born in Delhi
- Hindi and English speaker
- Writer of “speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and fantasy”
- PhD in Theoretical Physics, USA
- Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics and Earth Science at Framingham State University, in Massachusetts
- Current research: environmental change

Singh is known not only for her sf but also for her children’s books, *Younguncle Comes to Town* (2004) and *Younguncle in the Himalayas* (2005).



Singh’s sf consists exclusively of short fiction. She has published her work in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and has collected some of her earlier stories in the 2008 volume, now out of print, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet*. A second volume, *Ambiguity Machines and Other Tales* is to be published in 2018 by Small Beer Press.



Vandana Singh belongs to a generation of Anglophone women science fiction authors who, it is only fair to note, no longer fight discrimination in this field. She has been, actually, very much welcomed by critics and readers as part of women's growing participation in the genre. Also, of non-white science fiction writers. An example of this double trend is the spectacular achievement of an African American woman writer, N.K. Jemisin, awarded the Hugo in two consecutive years, 2016 and 2017.



The collective volumes to which Singh has contributed stories also tell much about this exciting new situation. They include *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan in 2004, and the first volume of its kind; the feminist collection *The Other Half of the Sky* edited

in 2013 by Athena Andreadis and Kay T. Holt; and *Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future*, edited by Ed Finn and Kathryn Cramer (2014), a volume focused on scientific progress.

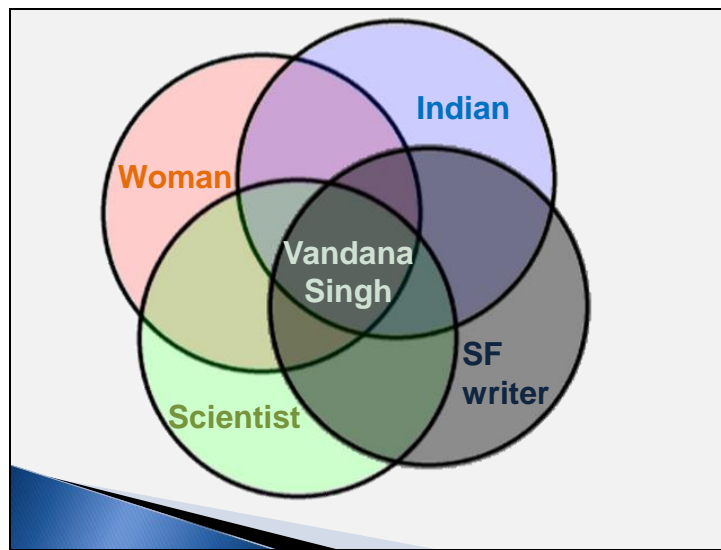


To this we must add the inclusion of “Ruminations in an Alien Tongue”, to which I will return, in the 2013 volume edited by Gardner Dozois, *The Year’s Best Science Fiction*. Singh, additionally, is co-editor with Anil Menon, another fundamental Indian sf writer, of an anthology bearing the self-explanatory title of *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* (2012).

Singh’s fiction is, then, of interest from a postcolonial, a feminist and a scientific perspective *and* because it is quality science fiction. Also, because she is very much aware of the legacy of Indian myth. Indeed, most Indian SF writers agree that a singularity of the genre which they cultivate is how deep it sinks its roots in Indian mythology. Interestingly, this resonates with Jack Fennell’s presentation of Irish science fiction as also rooted in local myth, and of all sf as a narrative tool to create new myth. Within Singh’s production “Somadeva: A Sky River Sutra” is one of her most obvious incursions into the mythical. And Fennell seems right indeed, for Singh’s myth-making drive certainly shapes her fiction, as readers see in stories like “Infinites”, perhaps her best, in which myth, mathematics and Indian politics merge flawlessly. This myth-making drive responds, however, mainly to Singh’s passion for science. I would not claim that her stories simply illustrate scientific concepts, but examples like

“Entanglement” (a truly global story about how human beings connect with each other) have layers of meaning best appreciated by readers with a scientific education.

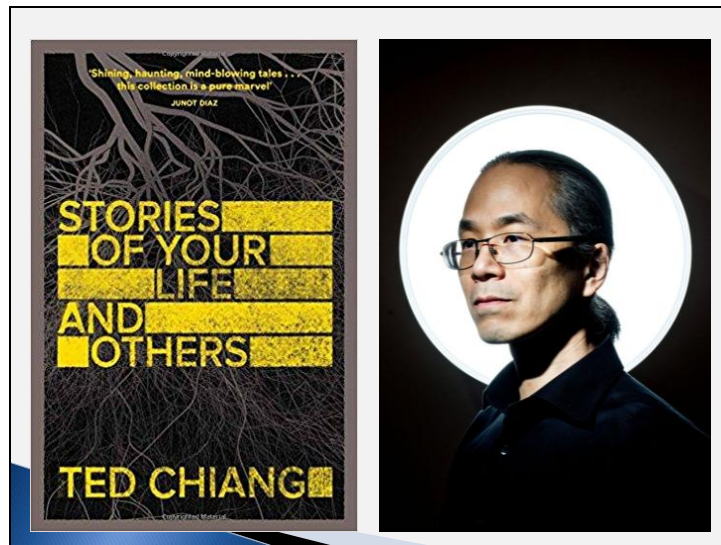
The many, varied stories by Singh, then, highlight the limitations of the labels that we use in literary studies for she cannot be pinned down under a single one, whether this is woman, Indian, speculative writer, or scientist. In the absence, then, of any specific wrong against Vandana Singh that needs to be redressed, the issue I am raising here, knowing that this is extremely controversial, is whether studying her as, fundamentally, a ‘postcolonial writer’ may constitute in itself a wrong.



This wrong extends to other cases. Vandana Singh’s fiction often recalls that by her fellow sf writer Ted Chiang, author of “Stories of Your Life” (1998), which the film *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016) adapted. Chiang, born in the USA to Chinese parents, is celebrated as the new Jorge Luis Borges, and never treated as an ethnic writer within science fiction circles. However, this is not the case in academia. Thus, most of the scant six entries on Chiang’s work referenced by the MLA database refer to his ethnic background.

Interestingly, Chiang was interviewed by Singh during the Asian American Writers’ Workshop of 2012. Singh and Chiang mutually praised each other for how their stories approach, in her words, “fantastical made-worlds in a wholly scientific way”. Inexorably, the issue of race came up. “Does your being Asian American inform your stories in any way?”, Singh asked. Chiang replied that “Race inevitably plays a role in my life, but to date it’s not a topic I’ve wanted to explore in fiction”. He complained

that “People have looked for a racial subtext in my work in a way I don’t think they would have if my family name were Davis or Miller” (in Singh 2012: online).



We need to wonder what the best solution is to the problem that Chiang posits, for either we stop asking non-white writers about their racial and ethnic backgrounds, or we start asking white writers about theirs. In this way, we’ll give much needed visibility to the implicit ‘norm’ against which every non-white writer is measured.

Vandana Singh has already attracted some academic attention. I’ll refer here to two articles, before examining her own words. The two articles contribute to the central debate I am raising here on whether reading non-white authors in a context in which the category ‘white’ is both normative and underexplored is a wrong.

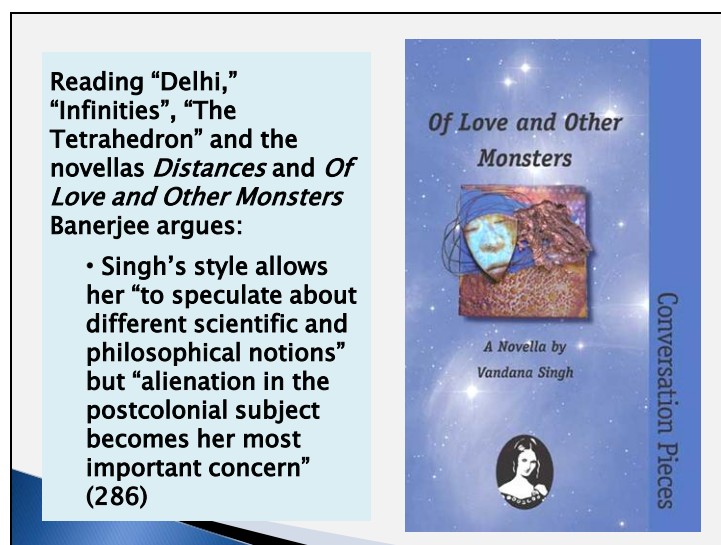
A postcolonial reading of Singh

Suparno Banerjee (Texas State University), “An Alien Nation: Postcoloniality and the Alienated Subject in Vandana Singh’s Science Fiction”:

- one of the major topics of recent Indian sf is “the specter of an alienated postcolonial subject caught in the flux of historical eddies” (283)
- this is the estranged character that Singh explores, calling attention “to the different types and levels of alienation that haunt the people who negotiate their surroundings and identities in this new world order” (283)

Suparno Banerjee, already quoted in relation to Ian McDonald, claims in another article that one of the major topics of recent Indian sf is “the specter of an alienated postcolonial subject caught in the flux of historical eddies” (2012: 283); this is, precisely, the estranged character that Singh explores, calling attention “to the different types and levels of alienation that haunt the people who negotiate their surroundings and identities in this new world order” (283). Banerjee grants that Singh’s style allows her “to speculate about different scientific and philosophical notions” but insists that “alienation in the postcolonial subject becomes her most important concern” (286).

As a Spanish/Catalan reader I feel the weight of this postcolonial reading, for Banerjee’s Indian surname lends him an authority as a cultural insider that I cannot have. Yet, I still totally reject his subordination of Singh’s scientific concerns to the ethnic, nationalist reading. Singh does write about India with profound commitment but she is primarily concerned about how to turn science into narrative poetics, as she has often explained.



The article by Eric D. Smith raises, precisely, this issue. He proposes that we transcend “the limits of certain postcolonial theorizations in the postmillennial present” (2016: 514). By reading Singh’s novella using philosopher Alain Badiou’s critique of love, Smith argues “the insufficiency of postcolonial theory for capturing the event of postcolonial sf and the latter’s potential for the production of planetary being” (514). He dismisses Banerjee’s postcolonial claims as reductive, defending that

Singh's fiction "insists on themes of infinity, interdimensionality, and, indeed, universality, frequently underpinned by a referential framework of theoretical mathematics" (514). This is a position I do defend, yet I also resist Smith's reading: here is an American white man forcing Singh's stories into a philosophical cast set by Badiou, a European white man. Is this not yet another wrong?

A philosophical reading of Singh

Eric D. Smith (Uof Alabama, Huntsville), "Universal Love and Planetary Ontology in Vandana Singh's *Of Love and Other Monsters*":

- transcend "the limits of certain postcolonial theorizations in the postmillennial present" (514)
- (Alain Badiou's critique of love), Smith argues "the insufficiency of postcolonial theory for capturing the event of postcolonial sf and the latter's potential for the production of planetary being" (514)
- beyond the postcolonial, Singh's fiction "insists on themes of infinity, interdimensionality, and, indeed, universality, frequently underpinned by a referential framework of theoretical mathematics (...)" (514)

Malisa Kurtz's interview with Singh in the 2016 *Science Fiction Studies* monographic issue offers a singular opportunity to consider the author's view. Kurtz foregrounds Singh's "fascination with scientific speculation" (534) and with "the provisionality of scientific knowledge" (536). As for the author, she declares that she "cannot separate the aesthetic impulse that drives me to create worlds from the pleasure I get doing physics" (538).

Kurtz, then, invites Singh to explain how her sf connects with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, and also to disclose her relief at discovering Bengali sf writer Premendra Mitra (read in English translation) for "I didn't want sf written by people from the West to be the only standard with which to compare and contrast my stories. So Mitra was a delightful discovery (...)" (537).

Interview, Malisa Kurtz (Brock University):

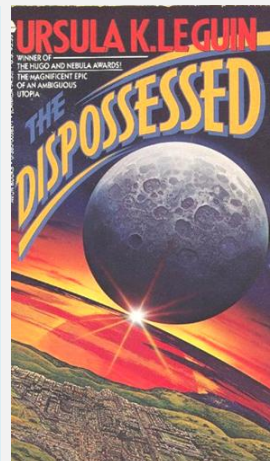
- foregrounds Singh's "fascination with scientific speculation" (534)
- Singh: "[I] cannot separate the aesthetic impulse that drives me to create worlds from the pleasure I get doing physics" (538)
- invites Singh to:
 - explain how her sf connects with the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*
 - disclose her relief at discovering Bengali sf writer Premendra Mitra: "I didn't want sf written by people from the West to be the only standard with which to compare and contrast my stories" (537)

Singh's view



Yet, Kurtz also gets from Singh the story of how US women's sf saved her from alienation as a newly migrated PhD student. "What [Ursula Le Guin] showed me", Singh enthuses, "was an array of alternate worlds, futures, histories, in which people like me existed" (537). Replacing the "white-maletechnofetishist(s)" she used to read as a teen, "Le Guin's works restored sf to me, made it welcoming in a way I hadn't experienced before" (537).

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- Singh: "What [Le Guin] showed me was an array of alternate worlds, futures, histories, in which people like me existed" (537)
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Kurtz, of course, asks Singh what she thinks about the label 'postcolonial science fiction'. Politely declaring that she lets "the scholars worry about definitions", Singh explains that, for her, 'postcolonial' "has its uses" if it helps to dismantle what she calls 'paradigm blindness', that is to say, the "blinkers" imposed by the colonizers.

Like many other writers, and scholars, however, she objects that “an implication of the term ‘postcolonial’ is that the unit of measure, the standard, is still the colonizer. That can be limiting. So while I acknowledge the importance of the term, I also want to transcend it, to go off and play in the much larger universe we inhabit” (543). Thankfully, science fiction offers, she claims, the “experience of playfully trying to decolonize my mind—shaking free of hitherto unexamined paradigms, trying to look at new vistas through new eyes” (544).

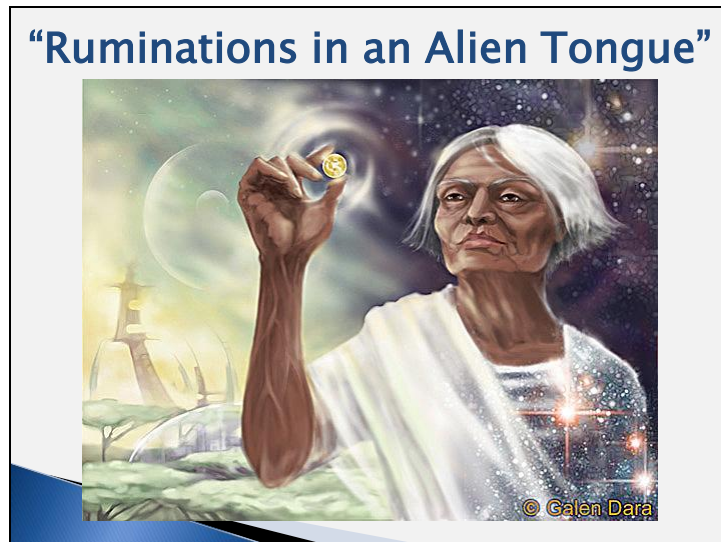
The label ‘postcolonial science fiction’:

- ‘postcolonial’ “has its uses” if it helps to dismantle ‘paradigm blindness’, the “blinkers” imposed by the colonizers
- but “an implication of the term ‘postcolonial’ is that the unit of measure, the standard, is still the colonizer. That can be limiting. So while I acknowledge the importance of the term, I also want to transcend it, to go off and play in the much larger universe we inhabit” (543)
- science fiction offers the “experience of playfully trying to decolonize my mind—shaking free of hitherto unexamined paradigms, trying to look at new vistas through new eyes” (544)

Singh’s science fiction, then, suggests that just as her characters move across dimensions while being deeply rooted in their places, we need to embrace, literally, multiuniversalism. And, so, in her beautiful story “Ruminations in an Alien Tongue”, and in many others, Singh partly pulls the postcolonial rug from under our feet by moving away from Earth. Her ageing protagonist, mathematician Birha, is of Indian origin and this is how we need to visualize her.

However, Birha is also a term from Punjabi Sufi Poetry which refers to “separation which implies longing for reunion” and this is the central theme of her story. Unlike the Sufi poets, Birha longs not for God but for Rudrak, the man she loves platonically. He is stuck in an endless time loop after crossing the shadow universe of the stars with her lover Ubbiri (to do research on white dwarfs). Rudrak returns every few years to the alien planet where Birha lives and where Ubbiri died, only to discover anew his terrible loss. This is the romantic tip of the iceberg in a story that also deals with Birha’s discovery of a portal in the abandoned planet that gives access to different

universes. Everyone rushes into their chosen universe, hoping to improve their lives; Birha chooses, instead, to face death as she calculates the time of Rudrak's return, whiling the time away by learning to play alien music.



This is how science fiction works: it invites us to imagine what it is like to be an individual awed by the immensity of the universe or, as scientists prefer today, of the multiverse. Whether this individual is an Indian non-white woman or an American white man matters very much, for each reader should be able to imagine her or himself in that central (yet humbling) position. Hence the relevance of the postcolonial reading of Singh's work. However, we do Singh, and all the other Indian science fiction writers, a wrong, by supposing that their characters are, above all, instances of Indianness—which they are, of course—when they are created to be, above all, human beings for all readers to connect with, just as happens in Anglo-American science fiction. This is a major wrong we must redress.

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